



TOP GADGETS

With 24 tech treats from just £10, you're sure to find the perfect gift in our Christmas special



Seeing the smiles on the faces of your nearest and dearest as they unwrap your carefully chosen Christmas present is one of life's joys, but buying the presents in the first place is stressful at the best of times. Fighting through crowds of last-minute shoppers in the rain looking for ideas is no fun at all. Fortunately, we're here to help.

We've tested 24 of the best gadgets money can buy, ranging from £10 to £200. There's a gift for everyone in our guide, from watches that can play video to music players to a USB mixing kit for budding DJs. We've thoroughly tested each one, so read on to find out which gifts will bring a smile to someone's face, and which would end up in the attic after a day.



TOP GADGETS

£20 & under



PALADONE Sharp Shootin' Remote Control

★★★★★

£10 inc VAT

From www.firebox.com

Sometimes we all want to shoot at the telly – and now you can. The Sharp Shooter Remote replicates the function of one of the buttons on your TV remote control, so when you shoot at the TV it'll change the channel or switch it off.

It's easy to set up. You simply put two AA batteries in the handle, aim your remote at the back of the gun then press the button you want the gun to replicate. It will work with most audio and visual equipment, so you could program it to change tracks on a CD player, for example.

The gun can be programmed for only one function at a time, so if you've programmed it to go up a channel when you fire, you'll have to reprogram it if you want to go down. It'll probably give one person in your family a lot of pleasure on Christmas Day and annoy everybody else, so don't buy it for someone you have to live with.

MAIN SAUCE Flying Alarm Clock

★★★★★

£15 inc VAT

From www.iwantoneofthose.com

Before you get as excited as we were, it isn't the whole alarm clock that flies, just the propeller at the top. When the alarm goes off, the propeller flies off the base and lands a couple of feet away. The only way to turn the alarm off is to replace the propeller at the top of the base, ensuring that you have to get out of bed.

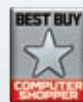
We would have liked the propeller to fly a bit further, as it lands within many people's lazy morning reach, but it's still a fun way to wake up in the morning. The alarm is loud enough to wake up all but the sleepest of heads and it sounds like the emergency warning from Star Trek, which can only be a good thing.



MSI StarCam Genie

★★★★★

£16 inc VAT

From www.yoyotech.co.uk

If you have a webcam and a messenger program such as Windows Live Messenger, you can easily make video calls for free over the internet. If you're after fame and fortune, a webcam is also an easy way to make a video podcast to put on YouTube. MSI's StarCam Genie is a budget VGA webcam that can be used for just such a purpose.

Despite its low price, the StarCam Genie is well designed and feels well made. The camera comes with a hinged stand which can either sit on your desk or clamp to the top of your monitor, and the camera itself fixes magnetically to the stand. The back of the camera has a round bump which contains the magnet. As the camera isn't physically fixed to the mount it's easy to adjust it to the angle you want.

The StarCam Genie's video images are in focus and clear. There's also a built-in microphone for chatting over the web. It's a well-designed and good-quality webcam at a bargain price.



RADICA U.B.Funkeys Starter Kit

★★★★★

£20 inc VAT

From www.firebox.com

U.B.Funkeys is a game for children. It comes with a USB hub in the shape of a Funkey, on which you sit the character you want to play with. You can change the character whenever you like and the character will change on your PC's screen. This also opens locations on the map that may not have been open to your previous character. There are two Funkeys in the starter pack.

As you send your Funkey around Funkeystown, there are rooms you can enter and play games. Each game you play earns your Funkey some coins, which can be used to customise its crib. You can also share your crib with friends online. The games tend to be based on matching pairs, but it's good fun and is stimulating for young children. Just make sure they don't want to collect all 42 characters, as they cost £5 each.



CASE LOGIC XNS-15 15in Reversible Shuttle Case

★★★★★

£20 inc VAT

From <http://direct.tesco.com>

Case Logic's Reversible Shuttle Case is a padded notebook cover for a 15.4in notebook. It's made from Neoprene rubber and is designed to fit snugly around your notebook, protecting it from scratches and other damage. It's not a bag and doesn't have a handle or strap, so you should think of it more as a sheath or sleeping bag for your notebook, which you'd then slip into your bag, protecting your laptop from loose keys or pens.

The case is available in six reversible colour combinations: cappuccino and sunflower, denim and charcoal, berry and smoke, pistachio and chocolate, turquoise and sand, and magenta and cappuccino. The case fits notebooks with maximum dimensions of 366x305x45mm and Case Logic's website has a list of notebooks that will fit, so make sure yours is on there before you buy. This is a well-made and nicely padded case which should keep your notebook safe and scratch-free.



QUIK POD Quik Pod

★★★★★

£20 inc VAT

From www.iwantoneofthose.com

The Quik Pod is a portable tripod for your camera. It's useful for when you want to take a photo of you and your partner without having to ask a passer-by to take it for you and risk them running off with your camera. You can use it as a hand-held camera arm to take pictures of yourself or as a mini-tripod to hold your camera steady. It's not exceptionally stable and is definitely for light cameras only. You wouldn't feel at ease putting a heavy and expensive SLR camera on top of it.

The Quik Pod folds down to around 7½in long so fits neatly in a bag, and stretches to 20in when fully extended and standing on its legs. It's a neat idea, but the Joby Gorillapod (*What's New, Shopper*, September 2007) is cheaper and more flexible. It costs £5 less than the Quik Pod and has three flexible legs that you can wrap around objects or just use as a tripod.



£50 & under

GRIFFIN TECHNOLOGY iKaraoke

★★★★★

£22 inc VAT

From www.morecomputers.co.uk

You don't need an expensive mobile PA and a stack of laser discs to enjoy a night of karaoke. All you need is an iPod and the iKaraoke microphone.

The iKaraoke works with fifth-generation iPods and second-generation Nanos. The microphone plugs into the bottom of your iPod, and you can either tune an FM radio into the iKaraoke's signal or plug a set of speakers into the line output. The iKaraoke mixes your voice with whatever song is playing on the iPod, so you can sing along with your favourite tunes.

You can also use the supplied software to create your own karaoke videos. Once you've imported the lyrics into the program, you play the song and press the space bar in time with each word to create a timeline. You can then create a video of the song's words to put on your iPod, which tells you when to sing each word. The iKaraoke's sound quality isn't great, but it's a lot of fun for £22.

H-MOD Stealth Switch

★★★★★

£30 inc VAT

From www.boysstuff.co.uk

If you like to surf the web or play games unhindered when you're at work, you may have to watch out for your boss and frantically scramble for the minimize application button.

The Stealth Switch makes evading The Man easier. It's a USB button that automatically hides all your open windows and applications, even removing them from the Windows Taskbar. Clicking the button again brings everything back instantly. The supplied software also has a few neat tricks. You can password-protect your hidden windows so only you can show them again, set your windows to hide themselves after a certain amount of time or even select a suitable work-related program to launch when you press the hide button.

The Stealth Switch is a bit of a gimmick and is fairly expensive, but it's well thought out and works brilliantly.



SOLAR TECHNOLOGY Freeloader

★★★★★

£30 inc VAT

From www.firebox.com

The Solar Freeloader is a universal charger for MP3 players, PDAs, mobile phones, digital cameras and handheld games consoles that can be powered by USB or using solar power. It comes with a wide array of adaptors so you can charge most modern devices. A full list is available from the Solar Technology website (www.solartechnology.co.uk).

The Freeloader is a small and neat device, and its metallic finish looks sleek and stylish. When you want to charge it with solar power, the bottom section can be separated to reveal two small solar panels that you connect to either side of the head unit. Its internal battery holds the charge for up to three months and will give you around two hours' talktime on a mobile phone or up to 18 hours' audio playback on an iPod.

The Freeloader is light and portable and will come in handy when your battery runs out. It's environmentally friendly and a good idea at a reasonable price.



PROPORTA Gadget Bag/ USB Mobile Device Charger

★★★★★

£43 inc VAT

From www.proporta.com

Proporta's Gadget Bag holds all the gadgets you could ever want to take out with you. It has one large compartment, which is suitable for can-style headphones, and two smaller compartments, which could hold your MP3 player, phone, games console or any other gadget. All the compartments are padded, so the bag feels sturdy enough to protect your delicate electronics.

One smaller compartments has a pouch for the USB mobile device charger. Once charged via your computer's USB port, it holds enough power to charge any USB-powered gadget up to five times before you need to charge it again.

The bag is larger than most of us would need, but the emergency USB charger is a neat device. It's available separately for £25 including VAT, and a variety of extra connector heads are available for just under a pound each.



POWERTRAVELLER Powermonkey eXplorer

★★★★★

£50 inc VAT

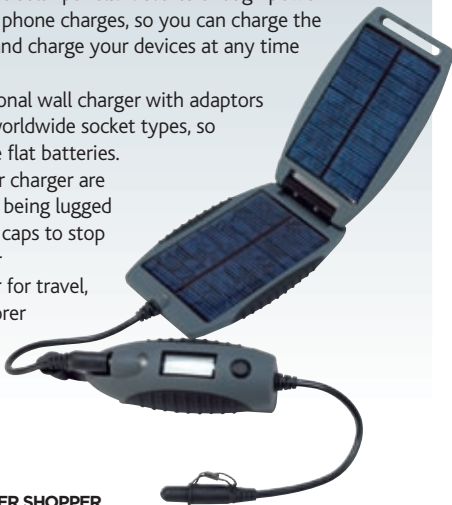
From www.greenorb.co.uk

The Powermonkey eXplorer kit comes with two fold-out solar panels and a range of charging 'tips' to suit most products, including Nokia, Sony Ericsson and Samsung mobile phones, the Sony PSP and all USB-powered devices.

How quickly your gadgets recharge depends on the strength of the sun, but a standard mobile phone should charge within a few hours. The kit also includes a battery pack that takes all of the same power tips and is charged by the solar panels. It stores enough power for around three mobile phone charges, so you can charge the battery by solar power and charge your devices at any time with the battery.

There's also a traditional wall charger with adaptors for the most common worldwide socket types, so you'll never have to face flat batteries.

The battery and solar charger are ruggedised to cope with being lugged around and have rubber caps to stop dirt getting in the power connectors. For home or for travel, the Powermonkey eXplorer is the easiest way to charge your gadgets, and it's great for the environment, too.



RADICA Connectv Plug 'n' Play Cricket

★★★★★

£40 inc VAT

From www.firebox.com

Connectv Cricket is a cricket game that plugs directly into your TV's composite video and phono audio inputs. The main unit, which includes the wickets, takes only a couple of minutes to set up, and the bat is in two sections that easily clip together. The main unit can be battery or mains operated, but you'll need to supply your own batteries for the bat.

Single-player mode sees you bowling and batting against the computer, while in two-player mode one player bowls while the other attempts to hit the ball around the ground. The game has an internal memory for storing games in progress, so you can come back to them later.

All the action takes place on your TV screen. By the standards of modern 3D games, the graphics are primitive, but that doesn't mean it's not fun. It takes some time to learn how to play, mainly thanks to the minimal playing instructions, but there's enough here to keep cricket fans happy throughout the winter.

TOP GADGETS

£100 & under



HORIZON H2 Hydrogen Racer

★★★

£60 inc VAT

From www.boysstuff.co.uk

Full-size hydrogen fuel cell cars can cost millions of pounds, but the H2 brings you fuel cell technology for just £60. It's powered by a fuel cell that converts hydrogen to electricity, and comes with a refuelling station to convert water into hydrogen gas.

The H2 comes in kit form, and has a detailed instruction manual. Building it is a lot of fun, and there's plenty to learn along the way. The refuelling station is powered by AA batteries or a provided solar panel, and takes about a minute to produce enough hydrogen to fill the car.

Unfortunately, the car's fuel cell is underpowered, and our car trundled along at a disappointingly slow speed. Horizon's H2 is an interesting idea and is fun to build, but it's expensive and the end result is terribly disappointing.

MP4 WATCH MP4 Watch

★★★

£60 inc VAT

From www.iwantoneofthose.com

The MP4 Watch allows you to view images, read e-books and play videos and MP3s. It has 2GB of storage and transferring files is as simple as connecting the watch to your PC via USB and dropping your files into the music or video folder on the watch. Video quality is reasonable, but the sound of the SMV video format the watch uses is appalling. SMV is not a common format and we had to scour the web for ages to find some freeware to convert AVI files to SMV.

The watch sounds OK playing MP3s, but the supplied headphones lack bass. Swapping them would improve the sound, but the 2.5mm output means that normal headphones won't fit. The watch can also record from its internal microphone at 256 or 320Kbit/s, but recording quality is poor.



INTERACTIVE TOY CONCEPTS Micro Mosquito

★★★

£50 inc VAT

From www.firebox.com

You don't need an eight-channel controller, carcinogenic model aviation fuel and a spare field to fly a model helicopter. The Micro Mosquito has a simple two-joystick controller and is designed to be flown indoors.

The Mosquito hardly weighs anything, yet feels sturdy and withstood several crashes without breaking. It's a simple and neat design. The landing pad doubles as a charging station, and a 45-minute charge to the Mosquito's tiny battery gives you seven minutes of flight time.

The first joystick controls throttle and elevation; the more power you give the Mosquito, the higher it goes. With a bit of practice you can make it hover at any height you choose. We had more trouble getting the helicopter to fly in the direction we wanted. You have to adjust the trim very carefully to stop it spinning in circles, and the slightest disturbance in the air sends it wildly off course. It's not perfect, but it's still easier to fly than most model helicopters.



ION Tape2PC USB cassette deck

★★★★★

£100 inc VAT

From www.firebox.com

If you still haven't found time to convert your cassette collection to MP3, ION's USB cassette deck can help. The twin cassette deck has a USB output and comes with simple EZ software that allows you to play tapes and simply press 'next track' to create a new MP3.

EZ converts audio into MP3 format and sends the MP3s to iTunes for playback. The advanced option is to install the bundled Audacity recording program, which gives you more options for editing your transferred recordings.

Because tape is an analogue medium, you can't speed up the process so your tapes will record to PC in real time, but the deck makes transferring tapes so simple that it's fun. You can just sit there and enjoy your old tunes, pressing 'next track' every now and again.

The sound quality is excellent, but £100 is a lot to spend on a gadget you'll use only a few times.



ION iCJ01 USB Mixer

★★★★★

£80 inc VAT

From www.djstore.co.uk

A really good DJ starter kit has to be easy to use, and ION's iCJ01 will have you mixing in minutes. You can mix MP3s using the mixer as a controller for the supplied software and scratch using your mouse. The scratching is surprisingly responsive and doesn't take up much processing power, so you can sound like Grandmaster Flash even on a low-specification PC.

You can also use the mixer as an analogue device. There are two stereo phono inputs for record decks and a pair of stereo RCA line-ins for CD players. You can switch between the inputs with switches on the top of the mixer.

As well as a decent-sounding cheap microphone, the mixer also comes with Audacity recording software, which allows you to record your perfect mix and then add a vocal later. The supplied headphones sound reasonable.

It's easy to spend a lot of money on a mixer, but the iCJ01 is an excellent product for the price. It's a steal for budding DJs.



WOWWEE Roboquad

★★★

£80 inc VAT

From www.iwantoneofthose.com

Roboquad is a quadrupedal robot. The manufacturer's website has a couple of impressive videos showing interaction with humans and other Roboquads, but this isn't the robot you dreamed of as a child. It won't do your homework, stand guard or perform complicated mathematical equations. It will, however, walk and perform some peculiar dance moves. These are possible because of the way Roboquad is put together, which makes it more flexible than most other toy robots. The remote control has different settings for Roboquad's temperament, meaning you can make it more passive or aggressive, but we struggled to see a difference. Its built-in guidance system also seems flawed. Roboquad looks great and is inexpensive, but it failed to live up to its promise.

TOP GADGETS

Over £100



SUGAR 8in Digital Photo Frame

★★★★★

£120 inc VAT

From www.firebox.com

Sugar's 8in Digital Photo Frame can play music and videos as well as display digital photos. The screen's 800x600 resolution is high for its size and makes photos look detailed. It can read photos from its 512MB of internal storage, from a card reader that supports CF, MS, SD, MMC and XD cards, or from a USB flash drive. It also comes with a remote control, so you can flick through files from your armchair.

Photos load quickly. We couldn't get a small AVI video file to play from a USB flash drive or SD card, though, and it was very slow to load from the internal memory. MP3s load quickly, but the one-watt speakers sound harsh, thin and almost unlistenable.

Sugar's Digital Photo Frame may have poor audio and video playback, but it's fine for displaying photos and is cheaper than most digital photo frames.

CELLUON Laserkey Projection Keyboard

★★★★★

£125 inc VAT

From www.darkplanets.co.uk

Celluon's Laserkey Projection Keyboard projects an image of a keyboard on to a flat surface which you can use to type. It's easy to install and simple to use. It's compatible with Windows Mobile, BlackBerry, Palm OS and Symbian smartphone operating systems, as well as Windows XP, and can keep up with typing speeds of 400 characters a minute. It runs on a rechargeable integrated Li-ion battery and an adaptor is included for charging or powering your Laserkey from the mains.

The projector is around the size of a PDA, making it far more portable than a regular physical keyboard, and it fits neatly inside a bag or coat pocket. The keys are large, so it's fairly easy to type accurately, but as there's no feedback typing can feel odd.

The Laserkey is a clever idea and works well, but it's over three times the price of a standard fold-away Bluetooth keyboard such as iGo's Stowaway.



COWON D2 Portable Media Player

★★★★★

£130 inc VAT

From www.advancedmp3players.co.uk

Cowon's D2 is a portable media player that can play MP3, WMA and OGG audio files, as well as files encoded with the lossless FLAC codec. It can also play MPEG4 video files at a maximum resolution of 320x240 pixels. The player has 2GB of standard storage, as well as an SD card slot for extra space, and an integrated FM tuner.

You scroll through menus and select files using the D2's touchscreen. Audio quality from the bundled headphones is reasonable, although they sound slightly flat and lifeless. Photos and videos look good on the 2½in screen, although it's really too small for watching videos for long periods. We found that our review model would often stall for up to a few minutes when loading video, and on two occasions the player crashed and required a reset. A firmware update improved matters, but we still had the occasional crash.

The D2 is easy to use and looks great, but its stability problems are a big problem.



ION iED05 USB drum kit

★★★

£130 inc VAT

From www.firebox.com

ION's iED05 is a budget USB drum kit. The software is easy to use, although the menu is confusing.

There are 17 kits, ranging from Rock to Chinese percussion. None of them is convincing, but there are one or two interesting sounds. There's no MIDI so you're stuck with the onboard samples. It comes with a disc with tracks to play along to and you can record yourself using the included Audacity recording software.

The drum pads aren't very responsive, so playing is a hit and miss affair. However, the hi-hat and kick drum pedals are ridiculously sensitive, making the kit very hard to play.

There aren't many electronic drum kits around for this price, but ION's USB drum kit is too hard to play for us to recommend.

PYRAMAT PM440 wireless

★★★★★

£200 inc VAT

From www.boysstuff.co.uk

The PM440 is a chair and sound system in one. It's designed for gaming, and has a subwoofer so explosions and gunshots vibrate right through you.

The PM440 has twin RCA stereo inputs and a 3.5mm headphone jack for an MP3 player. Its trump card is its wireless sound. You plug the supplied transmitter into your sound source and match the channel on the transmitter to the channel on the chair. The transmitter has a range of around 10 metres, which should easily be enough to get from your hi-fi or games console to the chair.

The PM440's speakers have plenty of bass, and sitting on a subwoofer makes games immersive. Music sounds reasonable, if a bit bass-heavy. The chair is very comfortable, so long gaming sessions aren't a problem.

It's fairly pricy, but if you're into your games and have tolerant neighbours, Pyramat's PM440 would be an ideal addition to your living room. **CS**



TANGENT AUDIO Quattro

★★★★★

£200 inc VAT (gloss red); £180 inc VAT (black, walnut or white)

From www.firebox.com

Internet radio is a wonderful thing. Instead of being limited by whatever you can receive on FM in your area, you can tune in to thousands of stations worldwide.

The Quattro connects to your wireless network and downloads radio stream information for over 7,800 radio stations from the Reciva service. Setting it up is simple, as you just have to search for nearby wireless networks, enter your network key and connect. The Quattro supports WEP and WPA encryption, but not WPA2.

You can sort stations by genre and by country, and then by genre within a country. We had great fun roaming the world and picking up Kandahar FM and Radio Osaka. The Quattro has only a single speaker, but its audio has plenty of depth and a fair amount of bass. You can also plug your own speakers into the 3.5mm line out socket.

You can also play music from shared folders on your PC, or connect to a UPnP media streaming device. The Quattro is expensive, but it looks great and is incredibly easy to use.

